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Are Physicians more Technical in their Approach and Less Humane? A Call for Reconsideration

Waris Qidwai

Modern medical care has improved health of the communities and families and offer treatment options not available in the past. People who have access to these options are living longer and with a better quality of life.¹ This has happened due to unprecedented advances in medical technology over the past few decades.^{2,3} It was about 50 years ago that even as simple technology as ultrasound was not available. The present day advanced imaging technology offers investigative and therapeutic edge that was unconceivable in the past.

There are two medical practice approaches; a holistic approach that considers non-medical needs of the individual patient and an evidence-based model that addresses patient's illnesses and biological processes.⁴ It has been argued that with technological advances, treating doctors have become more like technicians and have started considering patients as disease entities requiring to be fixed. They look at patients not as a whole person with feelings and emotions but as a combination of various physiologic systems requiring correction when they become deranged. Such an approach can be detrimental to healing process.⁵

Traditional clinical practice utilizes a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approach in clinical practice,⁶ encompassing physical, mental, social and spiritual areas evaluation and exploration during clinical encounter. This approach utilizes a holistic approach that ensures treating physicians maintain and pursue their interest in their patients as human beings. This model of patient-physician consultation has been eroded by technological advances that have shifted focus on technology and away from patient, with detrimental impact on patient-physician relationship and trust.

Technological advances have reduced the use of traditional history taking and physical examination in clinical practice, since physicians incorrectly place less value to these modalities in patient management. As an example, physicians directly request for an ultrasound

examination in case they suspect liver abscess in a patient with high fever and right hypochondriac pain, without going into more detailed problem-oriented history and focused physical examination.

History taking offers an opportunity to patients to express their feelings and discomfort and is an avenue for catharsis with proven health benefits. It also offers the physician an opportunity to demonstrate their interest in their patients and their complaints, with positive impact on consultation outcomes including both patient and physician satisfaction. Physical examination not only provides useful information, appropriate use of human touch has healing properties and is reassuring for patients. It is disappointing for patients, if their physicians do not touch and examine them.⁷

Focus on patient-physician relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. It is strengthened; with both verbal and non-verbal interaction.⁵ Technological advances have limited the interaction between patient and physician and have adversely impacted their relationship, empathy, genuine concern of physicians in patient's condition and attentive listening including appropriate eye contact and appropriate physical touch, are necessary to build patient's confidence in a physician as clinical care provider and a good human being.⁵

The current trend of physicians using a more technical approach and less humane behavior needs reconsideration. There is a need to bring back more emphasis on humane aspects into clinical practice that ensures physicians approach towards their patients remains caring and emotionally responsive. This will require appropriate changes in medical education and curricula both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.⁵ Continuing Medical Education (CME) programs need to focus on emphasizing the importance of and promoting humane aspects in physicians approach during consultation with their patients.

Role modelling is an important area that can help promote humane behavior in clinical practice. Senior Consultants serve as role models for junior doctors and students. By placing more emphasis on humane aspects in clinical care along with required use of technical expertise, Senior Consultants can positively influence their junior doctors and students, who will incorporate these traits in their clinical approach towards patient care.

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To ensure that the benefits of technological advances in healthcare are delivered to the patients, it is necessary that appropriate value was placed to humane non-technical aspects in clinical practice. This will enhance patients' trust in their physicians and will have positive impact on their health.

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